DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 130 745 JC 760 629

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TITLE A Pilot Study to Assess the Effectiveness of the Recruitment Strategies and the Treatment of Non-Traditional Students Involved in a Short-Term Communications Course.
PUB DATE 22 Dec 76
NOTE 45p.; Ed.D. Practicum, Nova University

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$2.06 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Communication Skills; Community Colleges; English Education; Individualized Instruction; *Junior Colleges; Learning Laboratories; *Remedial Courses; *Short Courses; Student Recruitment
IDENTIFIERS New Purdue Test in English; *Nontraditional Students

ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to identify and evaluate effective recruitment strategies and the effectiveness of a short-term, individualized audio-tutorial course designed to improve the communications skills of non-traditional students. Subjects were 30 students enrolled in and completing the individualized course, Learning Skills I, and 30 control students. Experimental group students were interviewed in order to determine how they were recruited for the course. Results indicated that 67% of the subjects had been purposefully recruited into the course by counselors, the learning skills center, or by instructors. Subjects were pre- and post-tested on The New Purdue Test in English. Analysis of the mean scores for the experimental and control groups revealed no significant differences in the scores. No evidence was found indicating that the instructional treatment brought about any significant gains in the communications skills of the members of the experimental group. (Author/JDS)

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A PILOT STUDY TO ASSESS THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE RECRUITMENT STRATEGIES AND THE TREATMENT OF NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS INVOLVED IN A SHORT-TERM COMMUNICATIONS COURSE

by

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A PRACTICUM PRESENTED TO NOVA UNIVERSITY IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

NOVA UNIVERSITY

December 22, 1976

JC 760 629

ABSTRACT

This practicum identifies and evaluates the recruitment strategies as well as the measured effectiveness of Learning Skills 1, an individualized, audio-tutorial course offered on a short-term basis, as an effective instructional mode designed to improve the communications skills of non-traditional students.

The experimental group, consisting of students enrolled in and completing Learning Skills 1 (N=30), was studied to learn that three of the strategies used to enroll students in the course had been effective. Also, it was learned that in terms of students' (1) reason for enrolling in the course, (2) ethnic minority mix, and (3) measured communications skills levels the experimental group comprised a non-traditional student population, as defined. The pre and post test experience of the experimental group as measured by The New Purdue Test in English was compared with that of a control group (N=30) to learn that, as measured by the analysis of covariance technique, there was no significant difference between the two groups.

Implications and recommendations concerning the continuance of the short-term course at El Camino College as well as further study on this campus and in the national community are discussed.

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INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

Learning Skills 1 is a remedial skills development course resulting from El Camino Community College's plan to meet the needs of the non-traditional student. Each student in the course is handled on an individual basis and enters into an educational contract of one semester's duration in which he agrees to follow a system of steps involving chiefly audio-tutorial learning modules designed to repair or improve deficient skill areas. These deficient areas are identified by students' sub-test scores on the New Purdue Test in English.

The purpose of this practicum is to identify and evaluate, through data comparison and interpretation, the recruitment strategies as well as the measurable effectiveness of Learning Skills 1 offered on a short-term (six-week) basis as a significant educational tool in improving the skills levels of entering and returning non-traditional students.

The Significance of this Study

Many students enrolling in the community college enter with weak academic backgrounds. In fact, in some population areas, the academically unprepared student is in the majority (Kerstiens, 1971; Milander, 1971; Pollock, 1970). Many of these students are defined as "high-risk" students

> . . . those erratic high school record, economic plight, unimpressive standardized test scores, and race/cultural/class distinctions succeed in placing them at a distinct disadvantage in contention with the vast majority of students. (Moore, 1970)

In an effort to aid these non-traditional students, numerous preparatory and/or remedial courses and programs have been established by various community colleges. Frequently, the courses are diluted versions of regular college courses. Although evaluative research on these types of courses and programs is meager, evidence indicates that a majority of these remedial courses were ineffectual in aiding the non-traditional student (Cross, 1976; Knoell, 1973; Losak, 1972b; Moore, 1970; Roueche, 1968).

Therefore, much criticism has been directed towards community college "salvage" programs. Devall (1968) called these programs the "bugaboo in American education," for they have taken on too many tasks and consequently can deal effectively with but a few. According to Jencks (1968), the community college has not served to improve the status of the non-traditional student in any significant way. Even supportive critics have suggested that the community college has rarely attempted self-evaluation (Cohen, 1969; Kerstiens, 1971).

These criticisms have motivated the community colleges to initiate new and varied programs to accommodate the returning student, the recurring student, the culturally deprived student, the academically deprived student, the handicapped student, the ethnic minority student, and most recently the returning female student -- all of these categories being identified as comprising a substantial proportion of that group which is generically designated as non traditional (Cohen, 1971; Cross, 1976; Kerstiens, 1971; Ross, 1973, Roueche, 1972, 1973 and 1976; Turner, 1974).

Further, recent researchers have provided guidance and direction

for studies concerning instructional strategies and systems designed to treat non-traditional students, and this practicum has attempted to dutifully apply itself to these prescriptions. For instance, Willingham's (1974) and Cross's (1976) comprehensive assessments concerning compensatory programs state the need for more evaluative studies that will establish whether individualized instructional strategies are effective in improving the basic skills of non-traditional students. Features of the research models they provide have been incorporated in this study. Losak's (1973) statement that "the most legitimate evaluation involving standardized tests is postest comparison of scores earned by remedial students with scores of like students in a control group, since remedial students nearly always improve at the end of one or two terms" has been addressed in this study. Also the method of developing and assigning a control group utilized in this practicum should assuage the objections of those educators who view the process of randomly assigning control groups as "immoral because the student is being manipulated and because the college denies him the benefits of the remedial efforts." (Losak, 1973) Interestingly, the control-grouping technique employed in this study does <u>not</u> "deny" the student access to any remedial strategy.

Finally, it is proposed that this two-phase study is applicable to and is sufficient to fulfill practicum requirements for two Nova University core modules: Societal Factors and Learning Theory and Applications. Since this study focuses on strategies to identify, recruit, encourage and prepare the non-traditional student, this practicum lies in the province of Societal Factors. Inasmuch as the instructional methods employed are of an individualized, short-term, audio-tutorial nature,

this practicum also falls in the province of Learning Theory and Applications, especially because the Taschow (1968) study calls for additional research on short-term learning skills applications and also because Cross (1976) and Roueche and Mink (1976) state the clear need for additional research that would indicate the effectiveness of audio-tutorial and other mediated applications in the community college curriculum.

The Objectives of this Study

Therefore, this study was designed to determine the degree to which

1. a program designed for and addressed to the non-traditional student population (later defined) can indeed enroll these students,
2. an individualized, short-term (six-weeks in duration), audio-tutorial course improves the communications skills of students enrolled in and completing the course, hereinafter designated Learning Skills 1.

Hypotheses

Three hypotheses were tested.

1. Advertising in the school newspaper, local newspapers and the class Schedule as well as advice provided by school counselors attracts and enrolls the non-traditional student to the extent that more than fifty percent of those students enrolled in and completing the course can be legitimately classified as non traditional according to one or more of the following criteria:
   a. Their pre test percentile scores on the New Purdue Test in

English are below the fiftieth percentile (local norms (see Elmgren, 1971)).

b. Their stated reason (motivation) for taking the course indicates that these students perceive a need for communications skills improvement in order to survive or succeed in other courses in the college curriculum.

c. They are from and represent identifiable ethnic minority backgrounds.

2. Students enrolled in Learning Skills 1 experience an attrition rate in this course that is lower than the attrition rate experienced by all students in all courses in the College.

3. Students completing Learning Skills 1 achieve a higher mean gain as measured by pre and post tests on the New Purdue Test in English than students in a control group.

Definitions of Terms

Communications Skills - abilities to read and write as measured by total score generated by seven sub-tests contained in and comprising the New Purdue Test in English.

Non-Traditional Students - "Students who fall in the lowest third on traditional tests of achievement, who are brought to college by open admissions policies, who may have experienced previous academic failure and are fearful of low achievement, and who are not often well served by higher education" (Cross, 1976).

PROCEDURE

The Study Design

The study was designed to show whether (1) a non-traditional student

population can be enrolled in and can complete Learning Skills 1 while experiencing an attrition rate that is lower than that experienced in other courses in the College and (2) the entire group and any identifiable non-traditional sub-groups (see Losak, 1973) enrolled in and completing the course show mean gains superior to those of a control group measured during the same time intervals and on the same testing instrument. This design is described extensively under the next three sub-headings of this practicum.

The Samples

The samples involved in this study comprised an experimental and a control group.

Experimental Group

The experimental group was composed of students enrolled in Learning Skills 1 implemented on a short-term basis. In order to identify this group and to give substance to this identification, it is necessary to explain the recruitment and instructional strategies that were employed to enroll and treat these students.

Learning Skills 1 is a credit/no credit course offered in the El Camino College Learning Assistance Center as an individualized course offering. Based on the results of the New Purdue Test in English scores, other test data, and a personal interview, students are placed upon prescribed programs, usually of an audio-tutorial nature, designed to help them improve those specific academic skills that are lacking or which they feel need improvement. Students then sign a prescription-contract and are assigned a student technician,

who directs them in the use of prescribed programs, hardware, and other learning materials. Throughout the contract period, the contracting instructor and a student technician are always available to help the student and check regularly (at least once a week) on the progress of the student, making evaluations and recommendations that are written in the student's contract folder. At the end of the contract period, an interview between the contracting instructor and the student is arranged, and a final assessment of progress and contract compliance is made before course credit is assigned.

Although Learning Skills 1 had been offered typically on a semesterly basis, it had never been offered as a short-term accelerated course. It was decided to offer the course during the 1976 fall semester on an experimental basis. Articles in the school newspaper and the class Schedule as well as memoranda to school counselors were calculated to attract the non-traditional student; that is, the student who was returning to academic work after some absence and/or who tended to drop in and out of school, effecting what might be considered an irregular enrollment pattern. It was hypothesized that such students are timid about their continuing their education on a more regular basis either because they are not making good use of their skills or because they are not able to develop those skills that make for successful learning. Therefore, the particular emphasis in the short-term course was that of improving communications skills (reading, writing, listening, notetaking and test taking skills and sub-skills related to the communications process) that relate to success in college classes.

Control Group

The control group was developed from the student constituency that were enrolled in classes during the same time-period and were tested on the same instrument and at approximately the same intervals as the experimental group. Members of the control group were not enrolled in Learning Skills 1 or any other course designed to improve communications skills. The precise methodology and procedure for appointing students to this group, whose mean standard total score on The New Purdue Test in English is comparable to that of the experimental group, will be explained fully in the Data Collection Procedures section of this paper.

Data Collection Procedures

The data collection processes were as follows.

Experimental Group

1. *Early in the period of the course, each student was interviewed to learn the avenue that persuaded him/her to take the course: (a) advertisement in the class Schedule, (2) advertisement in the local newspapers, (3) advertisement in the school newspaper, (4) advice of a school counselor, or (5) other. In this interview each student was also asked to supply his reason for enrolling in the course. Student responses to both questions posed in this oral interview were generically grouped when possible and were recorded.*
2. *During the first two days following enrollment students were given a pre test (New Purdue Test in English)and their scores*

recorded. Their lower scores on seven sub-tests were identified and recorded together with the total scores they accrued.

3. Students signed a contract to work on certain prescribed materials for a six-week period, during which time they completed at least 48 hours of work to complete the assignment(s).
4. Students completing the contract were re-tested on an alternate form of the test that was taken as a pretest and such scores were recorded.

Control Group

1. Students taking the New Purdue Test in English as part of the College's routine testing/placement program and who were pre and post tested during the same testing intervals as were those in the experimental group were identified. These were not enrolled in Learning Skills 1.
2. Inspection of enrollment records and transcripts provided information to segregate those students who took any other courses designed to repair communications skills during the testing periods from those students who had no such courses. Those who took any such courses were eliminated from the control group. A random sort was performed to produce a group of thirty students to be studied. Pre and post test scores for this "refined" group were recorded.

Procedure for Treating Data

In accordance with the study design and the hypotheses stipulated, collected data were treated to obtain the results that follow.

Data Relating to Hypothesis One

In order to determine that those recruitment strategies employed to enroll students in the experimental group were indeed the avenues that directed students into the course, students were interviewed to obtain the results tabulated in Figure 1.

Figure 1

SOURCE FROM WHICH STUDENTS LEARNED ABOUT LEARNING SKILLS 1

Source	#	%
1. Article in the Class Schedule	17	37.0
2. Other Student	10	21.7
3. Counselor	10	21.7
4. The Learning Assistance Center	4	8.7
5. Instructor	4	8.7
6. Peer Counselor	1	2.2
N =	46	100.0

Interestingly, no student indicated that articles in the school or local newspapers had induced him to take the course. However, responses to items 1, 3, and 4 indicated that at least 31 students or 67 percent had responded to specific measures or strategies that were purposefully designed to enroll them.

Students in the experimental group who also were post-tested upon completion of the course accrued scores that are reflected in Figure 2.

Figure 2

PRE TEST EXPERIENCE OF EXPERIMENTAL GROUP (N=30)

	Standard Scores	Local Percentile Equivalent
Range =	53 - 121	1 - 86%iles
Mean =	85.4	23%ile
Median =	86.5	25%ile

The mean score experience of this group indicates that 22 students or 73 percent fell below the College mean of 100.0 or the 50th percentile (local norms). Therefore, Hypothesis 1a was confirmed.

Students indicated their reasons (motivation) for taking the course as reflected in Figure 3.

Figure 3

STUDENT's REASON FOR TAKING LEARNING SKILLS 1, ENROLLED GROUP

	Reason	#	%
1.	To prepare for over-all academic work in a community college	21	45.6
2.	To prepare for English courses	12	26.1
3.	To prepare for over-all academic work in a four-year college	4	8.7
4.	To improve skills related to job	3	6.6
5.	To attain personal satisfaction or development	2	4.3
6.	To become familiarized with college and college work	2	4.3
7.	To make a full-time course load to get GI benefits	1	2.2
8.	To get better grades in college classes	1	2.2
	N =	46	100.0

Those students expressing perceptions that are tabulated in items 1, 2, 3, and 6 fall clearly in the category defined by Cross (1976) and Roueche and Mink (1976) as students who perceive themselves as unprepared to participate effectively in the typical college curriculum,

and therefore they exhibit one trait associated with the non-traditional model. Since 39 students or 85 percent responded in these categories, Hypothesis 1b was confirmed in terms of the total group enrolled, but not the group completing Learning Skills 1. Therefore, data concerning the experimental group per se follows.

Figure 4

STUDENT'S REASON FOR TAKING LEARNING SKILLS 1, EXPERIMENTAL GROUP

	Reason	#	%
1.	To prepare for over-all academic work in a community college	18	50.0
2.	To prepare for English courses	11	30.6
3.	To prepare for over-all academic work in a four-year college	2	5.5
4.	To improve skills related to job	2	5.5
5.	To attain personal satisfaction or development	1	2.8
6.	To become familiarized with college and college work	1	2.8
7.	To make a full-time course load to get GI benefits	1	2.8
8.	To get better grades in college classes	0	0.0
	N =	36	100.0

Thus 32 students or 89% in the experimental group responded appropriately in order to confirm Hypothesis 1b.

In order to describe the total experience of students enrolling in Learning Skills 1 in terms of ethnic background and also in order to provide an efficient comparison between the experience of these students and that of the entire College population, the following four figures are displayed contiguously.

Figure 5

ETHNIC DISTRIBUTION OF STUDENTS ENROLLED IN LEARNING SKILLS 1

	Number	Percentage
Black	8	17.4
Spanish Surname	13	28.3
Asian	6	13.0
All Other	19	41.3
N =	46	100.0

Figure 6

ETHNIC DISTRIBUTION OF STUDENTS COMPLETING LEARNING SKILLS 1

	Number	Percentage
Black	5	13.9
Spanish Surname	10	27.8
Asian	6	16.6
All Other	15	41.7
N =	36	100.0

Figure 7

ETHNIC DISTRIBUTION OF STUDENTS COMPLETING LEARNING SKILLS 1 AND PRE AND POST TESTING ON NEW PURDUE TEST IN ENGLISH

	Number	Percentage
Black	5	16.7
Spanish Surname	8	26.7
Asian	4	13.3
All Other	13	43.3
N =	30	100.0

Figure 8

ETHNIC DISTRIBUTION OF ALL STUDENTS ATTENDING EL CAMINO COLLEGE

	Number	Percentage
Black	3,184	11.2
Spanish Surname	1,236	4.3
Asian	1,317	4.7
American Indian	402	1.4
All Other	22,269	78.4
N =	28,398	100.0

It is worthy of note that Figures 5, 6, and 7 indicate that the total experience of these students in terms of ethnicity and also in terms of their experience during the course and data-gathering sequence is remarkably consistent in terms of percentages. It can also be noted that 27 students with ethnic backgrounds (see Figure 5) enrolled

in the course and that 21 (see Figure 6) of these completed the course, thus occasioning an ethnic attrition rate of 30%, slightly under the schoolwide average for all students in all classes, (see Figure 9, to follow). Also, it can be noted that in terms of the number of minority students enrolled in the control group (see Figure 7) 17 students or 57 percent represent minority groups, which can be compared with Figure 8, which reveals that only 22 percent of the entire College population consists of minorities. Therefore, Hypothesis 1c was confirmed.

Data Relating to Hypothesis Two

Data was obtained from the El Camino College Office of Institutional Research to provide the following information and results.

Figure 9

COURSE ATTRITION RATE FOR ALL COURSES TAKEN AT EL CAMINO COLLEGE, FALL SEMESTER 1976

Number of Students Enrolled in All Class Spaces in All Courses =	60,136
Number of Students Completing Courses in All Class Spaces =	41,125

Attrition Rate = 32%

These data and results can be compared with those listed in Figure 10.

Figure 10

ATTRITION RATE FOR STUDENTS ENROLLED IN LEARNING SKILLS 1

Number of Students Enrolled =	46
Number of Students Completing Course =	36

Attrition Rate = 21%

Therefore, it is evident that the attrition rate in Learning Skills 1 is significantly below that of the attrition rate for all courses taken at the College, thus confirming Hypothesis 2.

Data Relating to Hypothesis Three

Data derived from pre and post testing both the experimental and control groups were compared to determine whether there was significant difference between their experiences.

Although 36 students in the experimental group completed Learning Skills 1, it was possible to obtain both pre and post test data on only 30 of the students for two reasons. First, in four cases, students enrolled in the course had been erroneously informed by counselors that, since they had been previously tested on the New Purdue Test in English, they would not have to be re-tested upon enrolling in the course. Respecting these assurances and realizing that relatively ancient pre-test scores would not fairly measure and might well bias students' entry levels, the participant eliminated these students from the experimental group. Second, two students were absent when the post test was administered and were naturally precluded as part of this sub-study. Therefore, 30 students were assigned to this particular study and their experience follows.

Figure 11

PRE AND POST TEST EXPERIENCE OF EXPERIMENTAL GROUP (N = 30)

Variable	Pre Test	Post Test
Range =	53 - 121	53 - 128
Mean =	85.4	95.3
Standard Deviation =	20.2	19.4

The control group, developed and comprised as previously discussed in this paper, evidenced the following experience.

Figure 12

PRE AND POST TEST EXPERIENCE OF CONTROL GROUP (N = 30)

Variable	Pre Test	Post Test
Range =	59 - 123	73 - 122
Mean =	84.7	91.1
Standard Deviation =	17.0	15.0

The testing experience of the experimental and control groups were compared, utilizing the analysis of covariance technique. The data produced an F value of 51.62 to indicate that the hypothesis of equal slopes, of the analysis of covariance model, was rejected (as F.95 = 4.00) indicating that the slopes were significantly different from one another; thus the mean differences were not significant as the covariant did not account for any contributing effect. Therefore, Hypothesis 3 was rejected.

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Discussion

Since the data indicate that a majority (67%) of students enrolled in the course had responded to strategies calculatedly employed to enroll them, and since more than fifty percent of those students completing Learning Skills 1 (1) registered pre test scores below the fiftieth percentile (local norms) on the New Purdue Test in English, (2) reported that their reasons for taking the course were consistent with the apprehensive behavior associated with non-traditional populations,

and (3) represented ethnic minority backgrounds, Hypotheses 1a, b, and c were confirmed. Again, since the attrition rate in Learning Skills 1 was lower than the over-all attrition rate of students enrolled in all courses offered on campus, Hypothesis 2 was confirmed. Therefore, it seems reasonable to conclude that the recruitment strategies designed to enroll students who would complete the course were effective, although apparently articles in school and local newspapers were not in the least successful as enrollment instruments.

Since the employment of the analysis of covariance statistical technique in comparing mean pre and post test scores derived from measuring the experimental and the control groups indicated no significant difference between the two groups, Hypothesis 3 was rejected. Therefore, in terms of the procedure and criteria employed, there is no statistical evidence that would indicate that the instructional treatment these students received brought about statistically measurable gains in their communications skills.

The principal implication leading from this study, therefore, is that Learning Skills 1, offered on a short-term basis is not a significant educational tool to be employed with non-traditional students as described and identified in this practicum. Nor does this study provide evidence that individualized, chiefly audio-tutorial, instructional applications effectively treat the academically unprepared student -- the non-traditional student.

Implications at the Local Level

To the extent that the recruitment program designed to attract and

and enroll non-traditional students into Learning Skills 1 offered on a short-term basis is essentially effective, it is important that specific measures (especially advertisement in the class Schedule and information provided school counselors) be re-employed at times and in cases that a non-traditional population is being solicited. Therefore, as the College continues to offer Learning Skills 1 and other courses offered on a regular, semesterly basis, its utilization of these enrollment strategies might be encouraged.

To the extent that Learning Skills 1 offered on a short-term basis has not proved itself to be effective in raising students' communications skills competencies as measured and evaluated, the College should take these findings into account as it considers re-instituting the short-term course during subsequent semesters or summer sessions. Additionally, these pre and post test findings would imply that other self-instructional applications on campus should be reviewed with an attitude of constructive dissatisfaction and consideration should be given to evaluating these offerings.

Implications at the Regional and National Levels

At the regional and national levels and as indicated in the professional literature, this study suggests that there are implications in at least three areas which might be worthy of note as well as substantive direction.

First, the fact that this study involved a short-term course indicates that the Taschow (1968) study's findings have not been supported inasmuch as Taschow found short-term communications skills instruction to be superior to comparable instruction offered on a long-term (one

semester) basis.

Second, Roueche's initial assessment and hopeful prediction (1976) that self-instructional and mediated modular learning is particularly applicable to and effective in treating non-traditional students is not, at least in terms of this study's pre and post test measurement, supported. However, it should be noted that Roueche's research does not involve students undergoing short-term treatments per se.

Third, this study is related to Cross's (1976) statement that audio-visual instructional modes at the community college level need to be identified and further evaluated, especially because audio-tutorial instruction is relatively new on community college campuses and therefore has not been evaluated extensively. As more community college studies are completed to corroborate or diminish the findings of this study, perhaps some principles concerning audio-tutorial strategies will emerge and have an effect on policies directing the furtherance or discontinuance of their implimentation.

Recommendations

The following recommendations, to be pursued at the local level, are made in the light of the findings of this study.

1. The recruitment strategies employed to enroll students in Learning Skills 1 offered as a one-semester course or for any other course designed for the non-traditional student should be implemented in accordance with those strategies found to be effective.
2. Learning Skills 1 should not be offered again on a short-term

basis unless or until (a) other measures are implemented to evaluate it (b) a study is conducted to determine whether there is a residual gain factor inherent in the New Purdue Test in English that would invalidate its use as a pre and post test measuring instrument and/or (c) the present strategies or instructional modules used to treat a student enrolling in Learning Skills 1 are re-evaluated and then re-designed to provide a treatment that is different from and hopefully superior to those which are presently employed.

3. Learning Skills 1 offered on a semesterly basis should be evaluated to learn whether this long-term application itself is worthy of inclusion in the curriculum.
4. That the attrition rate of students enrolled in the experimental Learning Skills 1 course is appreciably lower than the attrition rate experienced in all other courses offered by the College is worthy of further research. Therefore, it is recommended that a study be performed to determine why this phenomenon obtains and whether there are any implications involved in Learning Skills 1 applications that would affect those implemented in other courses, especially those courses that are designed to support the non-traditional or academically atypical student.

The following recommendations are presented to researchers and practitioners in the community college regional and national community as matters worthy of concern and further study.

1. Because this study negates the notion or finding that students

engaged in a short-term learning skills improvement program enjoy greater improvement than those engaged in the typical learning skills improvement process, more research should be initiated to confirm or negate the outcomes of this study and to provide more evidence that will compare accelerated instructional programs and the typical experience in order to show which is superior or which type is more effective with given students or objectives.

2. This study should be replicated using the same design and measuring instruments and should also be replicated using dissimilar instruments to determine whether the measuring instrument (New Purdue Test in English) is an appropriate or valid pre and post test measuring device.
3. To the extent that Cross's (1976) and Roueche's (1976) observations indicate that audio-tutorial and/or mediated instruction is either efficacious or worthy of implementation, the results of this practicum might be included as one study worthy of inclusion together with those being considered as indicative of student success or failure in the research matrix involved with treatment of non-traditional students.

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TOPICAL PAPER NUMBER 51

COMMITMENT TO THE NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENT

JC 760 629

COMMITMENT TO THE NONTRADITIONAL STUDENT

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Topical Paper No. 51

June 1975

ERIC Clearinghouse for Junior Colleges
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The material in this publication was prepared pursuant to a contract with the National Institute of Education, U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare. Contractors undertaking such projects under government sponsorship are encouraged to express freely their judgment in professional and technical matters. Prior to publication, the manuscript was submitted to the Institute of Higher Education, University of Florida for critical review and determination of professional competence. This publication has met such standards. Points of view or opinions, however, do not necessarily represent the official view or opinions of either the Institute of Higher Education, University of Florida or the National Institute of Education.

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COMMITMENT TO THE NONTRADITIONAL STUDENT

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College presidents have almost unanimously expressed desires to increase services to the somewhat new pool of students who include members of minority groups, women, and senior citizens, and to increase the effectiveness of these services. Since these presidents are also seriously concerned with Full Time Equivalency, many have redoubled their efforts toward enrolling more nontraditional students. A major problem, however, lies in the fact that their commitment and fervor are often not translated downward; administrative enthusiasm loses its spark before it finally reaches the student.

To a large extent, planning for the development of these new students depends on the means of assessing their talents, interests, and past achievement. Initiating these students into the academic and social life of the college requires change and flexibility in staff attitudes and institutional structure. Examination of personal and academic counseling techniques and procedures should result in some type of planned program for assisting the nontraditional student in goal selection and goal attainment. There must also be an examination of the present structure and content of the curriculum and instructional techniques used to develop pertinent educational experiences for nontraditional students. Once commitment has been made to these students, the college can effectively work toward improving recruitment, admission, counseling, academic planning, and student activities.

INSTITUTIONAL COMMITMENT

The community junior college has had some success in reaching the nontraditional student. Nearly all schools have adopted an open-door policy, flexible schedules, remedial and compensatory programs, special counseling and tutorial services, and a variety of other services. The success of these attempts can be seen in the increasing number of nontraditional students attending community junior colleges, the increasing number of these

students who are graduating, and the attention these colleges are receiving from other agencies. In spite of this, large numbers of nontraditional students are not making it to the community junior college and the attrition rate of those who do is decreasing only slightly. This, then, points out the need to make greater efforts to strengthen the democratization function of the colleges.

A more dynamic communication process of institutional commitment to the lower echelons of the college structure is one way to attain this goal. Translating institutional commitment to the action level may be achieved in many ways, for example:

1. The chief administrator must make known to all college personnel his position. If this is done in an oral presentation with a question and answer period, it is most effective. In any case, he should make sure that the message reaches all persons (including nonacademic staff).
2. He should request the next administrative level to furnish him with plans for translating his position into activities. These plans should include some means of evaluating their effectiveness.
3. The chief administrator should develop means of feedback from all levels, including from the students.
4. When certain degrees of success have been reached, the chief administrator should have a means of giving reinforcement.

These suggestions may appear to be too directive but experience has shown that many faculty members, counselors, and other staff personnel do not believe or understand the seriousness of institutional commitment. Once the institution's position toward the nontraditional student is established throughout, the climate for learning will improve for both the traditional and nontraditional student.

RECRUITMENT

Recruitment of nontraditional students makes it necessary to examine many aspects of the college usually taken for granted. First, the commitment of the college must be real. All levels of authority must make it clear to the total college that these students are desired and that resources

will be available for them. Too often recruiters have found that when large numbers of nontraditional students have reported for registration, the real problems begin. The attitude of the faculty and middle level administrators operate to "turn-off" the nontraditional student. The positive position of the college should be evident in all phases of its operation and the administration should periodically develop some means of testing its climate.

Second, the financial aid package should be realistic and true. Unfulfilled expectations of nontraditionals cause numerous complaints. One of the most common complaints is that the amount of financial aid actually received is not the same as that promised. Another complaint is that the aid did not cover certain items which it was expected to cover. It is important that there be a simple and true explanation of what the college can offer and precisely which costs are covered.

Work-study programs need to be handled with realism and sensitivity. Many of the jobs which colleges offer are beyond--and often beneath--the skills of the students. The recruiter should carefully analyze each student's aptitudes and abilities before committing the student to a job. A key element in work-study programs is that the work and the study relate essentially to the student's needs. A student interested in a paramedical work-study program might become dejected if the "work" turned out to be a dishwashing job in a hospital. On the other hand, it is important that jobs not be too advanced for less experienced students. Skillful counseling may help the student to accept a job he or she might consider degrading. Unskilled nontraditional students should be informed about actual job options before accepting work-study grants.

The pivotal element in the success of recruitment efforts is the selection of the recruiter. Recruiters of similar ethnic and social backgrounds as nontraditional students served will not necessarily accomplish the goals of the college nor will they automatically foster trust and respect from students. Recruiters should command thorough knowledge of the college operation, academic requirements, curriculum, and job markets. Moreover, recruiters should relate comfortably with nontraditionals. They must be familiar with the various cultures and life styles and know the significant

influential persons and places in the students' environment. Above all, in the competition for students, recruiters must maintain their colleges' integrity.

Recruitment Decisions

When the college is "ready" to recruit nontraditional students, it must develop meaningful academic experiences for them. It must make provisions for uncomplicated registration and class assignments, predicated on a curriculum designed for academic success. Course structure, organization, and methods can be so designed that the nontraditional student will have an opportunity to achieve mastery.

Before the recruiter begins the recruiting process the college should consider the following:

1. What types of nontraditional students are desired--adults, veterans, women, Blacks, Chicanos, Indians, etc?
2. Is there enough financial assistance--what type--how much--type of packages?
3. Do recruiting materials project the image the college desires?
4. Can the prospective student handle the recruiting and admissions materials? Does the recruiter know the community well enough to tap significant recruiting resources? Will he need help?
5. What "in college" students can be involved in the recruiting program?
6. What changes in the curriculum need to be made in order to accommodate nontraditional students?
7. What changes in other areas of the college need to be made in order to increase the retention of nontraditional students?
8. What type of articulation pattern should be developed with high schools, agencies, business, etc.?

Suggestions to Aid in Recruitment

1. Select an advisory committee of community persons to give input to the recruitment process. Such persons should represent the alumni, feeder schools, present students, businessmen, community leaders, parents.
2. Use some students and faculty members in the recruitment process.

3. Examine recruitment materials to see if they are readable, and include pictures related to nontraditional students.
4. Build good rapport with counselors at feeder schools.
5. Start recruitment process at junior high school level.
6. Advertise positive aspects of the school in all media.
7. Aim special recruitment efforts to parents or spouses of nontraditional students.
8. Publicize successful nontraditional students.

ADMISSION OF NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS

One of the major problems hindering admission of nontraditional students is the assortment of various forms students must complete. These forms often request information which is unnecessary, and frequently inaccessible. Written directions are often vague and procedures contained in the catalogue are often written for admission officers or registrars rather than students. In order to complete admission requirements, the student often has to make two or three trips to a college miles from his home territory at office hours that conflict with his working hours. All of these represent barriers to the admission of nontraditional students.

The registration process itself is almost a nightmare. The formal procedure usually requires sophistication which these students do not possess. Such directions as "Take this card to the young lady seated at the terminal"; "This class is closed so you must select an alternative"; "Have you discussed this course with your department?" are concepts often foreign to the student's previous experiences. A close examination of any admission and registration procedure reveals much duplication of information and many nonessential steps.

Words of caution--When a college accepts a commitment to open-door admission, in order to give it genuine value, it must be adequately funded. "To make open admission work, we need more extensive remedial programs, much smaller classes, sensitive counseling services and adequate physical plant so that libraries, for example, become places in which students can actually read and work."[1] Open-door admission does not have to mean high

[1]Editorial, "The Case for Open Admission," Change, Summer, 1973, Vol. 5 No. 6, p. 10.

attrition, watered-down curriculum and lowering of standards. It can have real meaning for students who have become accustomed to failure and it can make a real contribution to the college. To make the open-door policy an entree to success for nontraditionals the college must carefully study admissions procedures, counseling programs, faculty skills and attitudes, and financial resources.

Suggestions for Improving Admission Procedures

1. Develop a simple postal card for the initial admission step. This card could ascertain the most pertinent data, such as name, address, social security number, and other personal and academic data. Distribute these cards where they will be accessible to the students. Wide distribution in the student's neighborhood and school is necessary.
2. Develop a simple postal card reply which lists the items which the student should have on file before reporting for counseling and registration. Also, please state whether you will accept the student. Students want an acceptance reply.
3. Develop a simple form which can be completed at registration to get other needed data. The medical form and other information can be secured after the student is enrolled.
4. Transcripts of students' previous academic records are often very difficult to secure. If it is not too much of a problem, a request from the college to the schools previously attended by the student is often more effective than a request by the student.
5. Do not require students to make frequent trips to the college to secure acceptance.
6. Set up temporary admissions places in the community. Publicize these very well; use the local radio stations. More students listen to the radio than read newspapers.
7. Train all staff personnel to receive students with patience and understanding. More people are turned away by clerks than any other group on campus. The image of the college is frequently set by staff people.

Suggestions for Improving Registration Procedures

1. Plan to have second-year nontraditional students help with registration. They know what the problems are and they know where a student can secure help.
2. Registration personnel should be aware of some of the problems nontraditionals face. They should know that many of the things they take for granted will be new to these students.
3. Be sure that the language is interpreted. "Prerequisites" is a difficult word; "closed" may have a very different meaning; "transfer credit" may be foreign; "Associate of Arts Degree" has different meanings for different people; even "required" and "electives" may be misunderstood.

COUNSELING AND THE NONTRADITIONAL STUDENT

Counseling is a crucial area of academic life. Indeed, the first point of contact with the college is usually made by the student with the counselor, and the initial orientation to the college is given by counselors. Thus, they provide the first impressions of what college is like. Unsure nontraditional students may be excessively impressed by the counselor's expressions and personality. Their lack of sophistication may cause them to place a great deal of confidence in what the counselor does.

This places a great responsibility on the counseling area and maybe this is what counseling is all about. Maybe counseling should provide the student with a caring image of the college. Maybe it should help underwrite the success of the student through careful and non-threatening diagnosis and placement. If counseling assumes these responsibilities, the student can begin to deal with his academic problem and with himself in a more realistic and effective manner. More learning takes place in an environment where the student feels wanted and accepted; therefore, the counseling area can begin to set the stage for the development of this type of learning atmosphere.

At the beginning of the community junior college movement, it was recognized that counseling had to be a vital part of the student's growth. The administrative structures of most colleges have almost universally included Deans of Students as part of the decision-making body and the counseling area has been fairly adequately staffed and financed. But while typically

counseling has been recognized as having a vital role in student success, it is even more critical for the success of the nontraditional student. In many community colleges the role of diagnosing the academic potential and analyzing the past performance of students is assigned to the counseling area. Curriculum and instructional planning is made more effective when it is based on adequate knowledge of the clientele to be served. Therefore, means of assessing the past achievement of students should be carefully planned and cautiously interpreted.

Traditional assessing instruments give a fairly accurate description of the student's achievement in a traditional setting and predict the student's success in a traditional curriculum to a fair degree of accuracy. In a nontraditional curriculum, the usual kinds of assessment do not provide an adequate basis for developing programs to meet the academic needs of individual students.

An academic diagnostic program should include more than one type of measuring instrument. Because most testing instruments do not measure potential, a more accurate picture of these students' assets is achieved when some measures of self and social reactions are also considered. The latter measures are very significant if one remembers that learning is enhanced when the student possesses positive feelings of personal worth.

Probably the most important aspect of diagnosis is that the interpretation of quantitative data concerning nontraditional students should be used with great caution. Diagnosis and prediction do not take into consideration motivation. Many nontraditional students succeed in spite of assessment data; many jump gaps and it is almost impossible to determine which students will do so. Therefore, it is unfair to categorize these students on the basis of test data alone. In fact, it is academically more effective to develop individualized programs of studies for nontraditional students according to their academic skills and interest.

Counseling may have the assignment of helping students to determine their goals. If so, it must be remembered that these students have had little opportunity for goal exploration. Therefore, some provisions should be made for career exploration and personal and social planning. This type of planning is most important in view of the rapid changes taking place in our

society and nontraditionals' lack of knowledge of the career options open to them.

Counseling for nontraditional students should include an awareness of the following:

1. Nontraditional students may not have a background of academic success and are therefore uninterested in further intellectualization.
2. If the counselor does academic placement, the nontraditional student should not be sold a noncollegiate program.
3. Nontraditional students want programs which lead toward rewarding goals.
4. These students want to learn; they are different but not ignorant.
5. Many of these students will suffer the "stranger-complex."
6. Listen to these students; really listen.
7. If a student cannot articulate his or her needs, ask questions and let the student explain.
8. When testing nontraditional students tell them why they are being tested, what the test is purported to yield and how the results are to be used.
9. Interpret the test results for the students. Explain in simple terms and solicit the students' participation in the analysis.
10. Stress only the positive aspects of the test results. Help the student to see his assets and to determine his needs according to the skills or knowledge he will need to achieve his goal.

ACADEMIC PLANNING FOR NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS

Recent trends in curriculum and instruction at the community junior college hold great promise for the nontraditional student. Emphasis on career-oriented curricula, individualized instruction, learning styles, cognitive mapping, performance objectives, and many other in-depth approaches for meeting needs of students, all appear to offer help in structuring satisfactory success experiences for nontraditional students.

Many colleges are throwing off the shackles of lock-step time sequences, rigid grading systems and the harness of four walls. All these developments help to bring academic experiences into a more realistic focus for nontraditional students.

A look at some of the academic planning for nontraditional students reveals that the structuring of curriculum programs offer more options. Some examples:

1. In the continuous curriculum, the student may begin at the level of his competency and move at his own pace toward mastery.
2. In the separate curriculum, the student takes special compensatory courses in order to increase his personal, social, and academic skills to a level which will enable him to compete with traditional students.
3. In the laboratory curriculum, the student pursues the same curriculum as the traditional student but has to spend additional time in laboratory situations with tutors.

These examples show the basic intent of community colleges in planning for the nontraditional student. In addition to these curriculum constructs, a variety of systematic instructional strategies have been developed to motivate nontraditional students toward more effective learning. Some of these strategies have been based on cognitive mapping, personality styles, various taxonomies, and concrete-abstract dimensions. "Modes of instruction vary from individual or team work with self-pacing and self-learning systems to discussion groups and laboratories where facts, skills, and ideas must be challenged and organized, from lectures where concepts are developed and related to problem-solving task forces or community experiences where the real world is made an integral part of learning."[2] Planning for the academic experiences of the nontraditional student has taken a variety of forms. Some degree of success can be demonstrated by most colleges using any number of these approaches. The more elaborate evaluation of academic planning is still to be done.

One of the most critical areas of planning learning experiences for nontraditional students is in teacher training. The community college instructor often has had a traditional training experience and has developed a set of expectations for "college students" and "college teaching." This is the

[2]Stanton Leggett, "Learning Program is as Multileveled as the Building", College and University Business, July, 1973, Vol. No. 55, p. 36.

critical point. The humanizing relationships of instructor with students make the real difference. Assurance of success can be attained with a warm, accepting, skillful teacher organizing learning experiences for students.

The literature today contains a wealth of information on appropriate curriculum and instructional strategies for helping the unsuccessful student. Yet there is a dearth of material on teacher behavior and, as Benjamin Bloom has pointed out, how instructors behave toward students rather than their intellectual qualifications makes the real difference. The need for helping faculty to learn how to teach is great or greater than the need to help students learn.

The training (either in-service or graduate school) of teachers who can make a difference must include developing a commitment to the mission of the community junior college. This should be the first step in developing an awareness of the teacher's own orientation to higher education and an examination of the changes the individual has to make in order to be effective with nontraditional students. Traditional training and teaching procedures of community college instructors are predicated on assumptions about students that are no longer valid. This often frightens teachers and when there are no resources to draw on for help, many stop teaching and begin to "hold class."

It is important that academic planning for the nontraditional student include planning for instructor growth as a prime ingredient. Resources should be allocated to facilitate such planning and implementation.

Some suggestions for Academic Planning

1. Involve students, teachers, administrators, and experts in the planning process.
2. Make adequate provisions for in-service training. This should be a continuous process in order to afford the necessary reinforcement needed during the initial period.
3. Allocate adequate resources for instruction. A mix of instructional ingredients may be initially expensive.
4. Examine a variety of curriculum options and include those which help students to achieve their goals.

5. Remember that relevance in curriculum and instructional planning should be formulated around the reality of the student.
6. Remember that nontraditional students expect the curriculum to provide them with experiences which will be valuable, and they want that value demonstrated.

STUDENT ACTIVITIES AND THE NONTRADITIONAL STUDENT

Nontraditional students are seldom seen in an active role in student activities. They feel as threatened by these activities as by the classroom. One of the best models for involving these students in student affairs and extracurricular activities is the one used by the athletic department for intercollegiate sports. The coach seeks out the student and then determines his interest and skill. He introduces the new player to the team and assigns him teammates. Until he becomes integrated into the team he gives him special attention. So for the nontraditional student, someone could determine his or her interests and skills and then seek him or her out. Students could be introduced to the activities in their field of interest, assigned a teammate, and checked on occasionally.

This type of care is necessary if one is concerned with the total development of the nontraditional student. These students know that college is different and they tend to be less adventuresome than the more sucessful student. Further, as the student looks around, there are only a few students from his home territory or age group. Most of the students he recognizes are from groups that he has usually not been associated with in his previous academic or social environment. The insecurity faced in the classroom is carried over into other school activities.

If the college recognizes that part of its mission is to help nontraditional students develop a feeling of self-worth and confidence, it can use its extracurricular activities as a means of reinforcing what takes place in the classroom. Such efforts involve the total college in the total development of the student.

Some Suggestions

1. Develop a strategy for involving nontraditional students in the student activity program. Involve students and faculty in the

planning and execution of this strategy.

2. Develop a feedback mechanism so that nontraditional students can make known their satisfactions and dissatisfactions.
3. Develop a plan for periodic assessment of the strategy.
4. Utilize other community resources as a means of extending campus activities.

SUMMARY

Some may object to such a large palette of suggestions for serving nontraditionals. What about other students? Will they be ignored in an overresponsive rush to help nontraditionals? The answer is that nurturing these students raises the level of consciousness for everyone involved--administrators, faculty, students, and community--by implementing into action the democratic function of the community junior college. Linking lines of communication between presidents and students they serve will benefit the entire college community; formulating realistic and accurate models of assessment for counselors will improve the planning and awareness phase of the entire college program; and casting a hard look at curriculum and its impact on nontraditionals will provide curriculum guidelines for all students. Total institutional commitment to nontraditional students, bolstered by appropriate changes in recruitment, admission, counseling, academic planning, and student activities, will eventually benefit all.